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Learning and the digital workplace: what? So what? Now what?

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Learning and the Digital Workplace: What? So What? Now What?

The only thing more certain than death and taxes is constant change. The digital workplace, and all things digital it brings continues to expedite the pace of change and amp up the complexity in how we work and live. As L&D veterans, who have monitored and engaged in the changing landscape of work and learning over the past 20 years, we are seeing, now more than ever, that the velocity of change is creating both opportunity and disruption to age-old standards of learning. How people learn, when and how often people need to learn, and what learning looks like is being completely redefined.

There's no doubt about it, the lines of work and learning are now blurred, and we believe that there are five significant trends that are working together to issue a wake-up call regarding learning in our highly digitized workplace:

- **The VUCA Environment** – The volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) of our global social, governmental, environmental, and economic systems results in an absence of certainty in what will be considered the critical competencies and skills of “tomorrow.” The average shelf life of a business competency is no longer decades, but rather just a few years. These forces continue to change how organizations are structured, led, and managed, and how they engage with their employees, causing a dramatic change in the knowledge, skills, and capabilities employees need to succeed.
- **The Information Explosion** – People and organizations are creating information at a staggering rate. Multiple channels (individuals, groups, organizations) generate information for various reasons. As a result, there is an increased need to help people aggregate, filter, validate, and contextualize quality information to enable impactful learning experiences. This explosion also decreases the useful life span of information and learning content, causing organizations to lean more on curating learning versus developing it.
- **The Flattening Organization** – More organizations are utilizing “connect and collaborate” managerial models and abandoning traditional “command and control” models. This breaks the misconception that contribution and capability starts with the individual and increases the value of enabling skill building through social learning and peer/team collaboration, to foster a “whole is greater than the sum of its parts” perspective.
- **The Mobile and Virtual Workforce** – Today's workers are increasingly mobile – both relocating and traveling for work – and performing their jobs in increasingly digital and virtual work environments. A growing percentage of today's workforce is “blended,” a combination of permanent and contingent workers, both full-time and part-time, with a variety of needs and constraints in terms of learning and enablement. This increases the need for shorter, more-efficiently accessible learning and an increased role for technology in learning. It also requires the need to provide a channel for social interaction that might otherwise be missed in an environment where workers are not co-located because they are constantly mobile and often virtual.
- **The Generational Mix** – Today's workforce is comprised of a rapidly declining percentage of Baby Boomers and a rapidly increasing percentage of Millennials, and let's not forget about our Generation Xer's. The volatility and uncertainty of the global economy coupled with the increased life span of our population is reframing thinking around retirement. People are working longer, causing more generational diversity in the workforce than ever before, placing more emphasis and importance on personalized learning experience and their benefits.

Learning and the Digital Workplace: The “So What?”

The chasm between business strategy and skillsets only continues to widen, and organizations continue to see a significant mismatch between current workforce skill sets and company strategy, goals, and business models. As the pace of the marketplace exponentially quickens, organizations continue to be burdened with the urgency to outpace others in their industries and sectors, emphasizing the need for swift and continuous upskilling of their employees. Expiration dates are not only stamped on content, but also on the shelf-life of employee skills and competencies. This coupled with the demands and needs of the modern learner requires organizations to be deliberate, nimble, and agile in terms of their learning strategy.

Employees are no longer waiting for their organizations to issue a mandate about how, when, and where they learn. As continuous learning becomes a necessity for both employee and company survival, organizations must break free from old learning paradigms to add value in an environment where everyone is a content consumer, creator, and learner all day, every day.

Learning leaders have more options and opportunities than ever before to develop their workforces, yet they have fewer resources and perhaps even more constraints. The ATD 2016 State of the Industry Report, indicates that L&D teams are under-resourced, with the average learning professional fulfilling three learning roles. Additionally, 70% of learning functions state that they have invested in learning management systems that do not allow for innovation, limiting the capability to integrate social, mobile, and other modern learning modes into current programs. With shrinking bandwidth, L&D teams haven't leveraged available tracking and reporting or analytics to demonstrate return on investment. In fact, only 9% of the successful L&D programs use standardized methods for measuring their success. All this, plus the instant gratification mindset of learners and their organizations has made true behavior change somewhat elusive. There is no doubt that the complexity of our environment has made learning leaders' jobs harder than they have ever been.

Both the organization's and an employee's success is based on how fast they can learn, and this has disrupted learning and the state of L&D as we know it. While formal, structured learning will always have its place, L&D's imperative must be to get beyond their primary focus of centralized and formalized learning and fully embrace the digital workplace and harness the benefits of informal learning to drive speed to competency and enable performance. The rate of workforce learning and enablement must outpace the rate of change, and the only way that can happen is for organizations to reframe how they think about learning and unify around enabling performance.

Learning and the Digital Workplace: Now What?

In this ever-evolving world, coupled with the pressure to do more with less, successful organizations and their learning leaders recognize they cannot control "all things" learning, nor should they. Rather, they see the urgency to move from an L&D centered, command and control approach, where a significant portion of time is spent on creating and controlling, to a connect and collaborate approach where curation, continuous learning, and enablement is key.

With limited bandwidth, L&D functions need to be deliberate about where and how they spend their time and do a better job of connecting and collaborating with the business, determining measures for success, showing return on investment, and engaging resources throughout the organization to deliver learning in a campaign style blend that enables continuous learning and growth for each individual employee, as well as the organization.

With the open learning market and the significant volume of quality content available to learners, L&D's value proposition must shift from learning development to enablement with a focus on the following key enablers:

Learning Curation:

While learning curation can be an antidote to content overload, it is so much more. Oversimplified, learning curation is helping people cut through content "noise," to get the right things in their hands at the right time to enable learning and performance. It is about leveraging content in alignment with an organization's culture and learner context; providing quality over quantity; and keeping learning contextualized, focused and evergreen. Good learning curation is much more than just redistributing content; it is reshaping content and integrating it into deliberate learning journeys that provoke thought, application, and behavioral change.

For learning curation to be effective, it must be framed against a deliberate and well-thought out taxonomy and tagging scheme. Without this, the learning experiences that are curated may not resonate or achieve the anticipated impact. Essentially, without the glue of a taxonomy, what is curated ultimately becomes an assembly of disparate parts; essentially, good content lacking context and instructional fortitude. Additionally, without tagging that "makes sense" to the intended audience or group the experiences are being curated for, the searchability and broader use of the content becomes limited, leaving a potentially dynamic learning experience, static.

For the strength of learning curation to be achieved, L&D can't throw the "baby out with the bathwater" and must leverage curation in alignment with good instructional design principles. This includes ensuring that application, feedback, experiential learning opportunities, and opportunities for reflection are integrated, compelling stories to ensure engagement. Additionally, methods of curation (Self, Organizational, Machine or Artificial Intelligence, and Social) should be considered regarding organizational readiness and maturity. The curation approach can only be as successful if the organization has invested in it and adapted it in terms of the culture of the organization. For curation to be successful, organizations cannot view curation as a modality, but rather as an overall strategy to enable learning in a more optimized way. This will require retraining and change management within organizations, as well as functional areas such as Learning and Knowledge Management to erase artificial barriers and unify around how content is aggregated, filtered, delivered to the organization.

Learning Personalization:

Learning personalization now needs to go beyond personalization for an organizational role or level to personalization and adaptive learning to a specific employee's skill gaps, learning style, and interests. Our multi-generational workforce and the pace at which business and skill needs change, ensures that everyone needs something different depending on what their circumstance and context is. This personalized view and focus not only increases employee engagement but also helps to zone in on and close personal, critical skill gaps quickly and with positive results. Learning personalization works because it is truly both learner and performance-centric.

It also works because employees are no stranger to personalized experiences. Every day they use and engage with sites that all provide some degree of personalization. Employees are not just accustomed to personalization, they now expect it in all facets of their life. Employees want what they need when they need it, delivered in a way that is in alignment with their interests and with what is important to them and their circumstance. Personalization enables employees to avoid wasted time wading through what doesn't apply to get to what does.

Technology is essential for executing a personalized learning strategy, and it can be used to enable on-demand, just-in-time content, and experiences; capture and leverage learner and learning data; and facilitate access and engagement in relevant social learning forums and activities. Using technology to customize the experience to the learner optimizes employee's time and gives organizations a view into how the specific learner is or is not learning and improving his or her competency.

Personalization requires investment, but the investment is one that truly returns. Organizations that are focused on enablement and performance recognize that personalization is now learning table stakes.

Social Learning:

Social learning theory is not new, and it is so much more than using technology to enable networking. Social learning is a holistic approach that integrates individual, group and formal and informal interactions to raise the bar on behavior change. Bandura's Social Learning Theory, published in 1977, states that people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling. With the onset of the internet and opportunities to expand social interaction via technology, its definition has continued to evolve. Today, social learning emphasizes collaboration, and at its core, is about learning with and from others. This becomes an important tool in a world of constant change, where collaboration begets innovation and exposure brings about change.

Social learning is one of the more challenging aspects of a learning strategy to implement. While counterintuitive, social learning must be semi-structured to ensure its effectiveness. It is tough for social learning to be as free and organic in a work environment as it is in a non-work environment. This is because employees are bound mainly by traditional rules and policy when engaging in social learning in terms of technology platforms at work; in most cases, they know that they should be careful regarding brand reputation (theirs and their company's) and company exposure to risk.

Social learning works, but it only works if it is setup to enable meaningful, relevant and thought-provoking exchanges between people. Additionally, it only works if your organizational culture can support and facilitate it. This type of strategy requires active facilitation to get traction and keep momentum. Successful organizations employ social learning by implementing group collaboration projects, moderating group discussions, using social polls and surveys, and implementing social technology platforms with the right capability to support on-line social interactions. Organizations who implement this strategy realize that while LMS technology is much improved, it doesn't provide the full suite of capability that social networking platforms can.

Learning Modalities:

In the digital workplace, employees expect learning to be readily available and accessible to them in a variety of modalities, as opposed to just instructor-led classroom training or e-learning. In response, workers are demanding – and organizations are investing in – an increasingly diverse set of training modality options.

While workers seek more micro- and just-in-time learning, they somewhat paradoxically continue to value more in-depth experiential learning. Experiential learning has proven itself over time to be the most effective means to acquire skills.

Workers are also increasingly seeking gaming environments in which to experience and participate in learning. Gamification's appeal to computer-savvy Millennials is fueling this. Millennials have grown up playing computer and video games; they gravitate towards experiences with game-like elements. Game-based learning also reflects the increased role of learners in controlling their own learning experiences.

Ultimately, no one modality can or will address every skill gap or competency. The key is still in the "blend" of modalities, and getting smarter and more effective with the blend based upon the audience needs and the goals that are to be achieved.

Learning and the Digital Workplace: The Implications for Learning as We Know It

The implication of the trends discussed in this article is that they have and will continue to cause seismic shifts in learning. These trends will not only change what “learning” is, but when, where, and how it occurs, and even the “why” behind it, as well as the outcomes it seeks to produce.

The VUCA conditions in which all organizations and employees will continue to exist and operate in, the exploding amount of new information flooding into our lives, and increasing reliance on “connect and collaborate” managerial structures, as well as the rise of the contractor workforce, will require every worker to learn, practice, and habitualize new skills. This will change the learning content that organizations will need to offer – and the processes by which L&D leaders will identify and curate it.

All of these trends will force learners to learn in new ways, through new technologies, and at accelerating speeds. Likewise, because Millennials value development so highly, and want to play an active role in their development and the development of others, L&D leaders will need to implement new processes and systems to curate and distribute learning content in an as-needed, just-in-time, device-agnostic environment. Learning will need to be available not in one modality, or even a few, but in many, with gaming and social elements surrounding it. This will change the platforms, systems, and tools organizations will offer. Employees will expect learning to be readily available and accessible through a myriad of ever-changing platforms and devices. Learning Management Systems (LMSs) will need to evolve radically to satisfy these expectations. In addition, learning content will continue to have a shortened useful life, which will drive curation to be a priority learning strategy focus.

L&D professionals’ roles and responsibilities will need to change dramatically in response to these trends and the new definition of “learning.” In the future, learning within organizations will be more about content that is curated and contributed by individual learners, and it will do less content creation and invest a significantly greater percentage of their time in strategic activities that help to enable learning experiences that deliver results. L&D leaders will help workers adapt to the VUCA environment, to their increasing mobility, and to the expanding array of networks, they will need in our “connect and collaborate” economy. They will help workers develop a wide diversity of skills and capabilities – leadership, management, communication, efficiency, delegation, and a host of others – to equip workers to function effectively no matter where they choose to go in their careers. And they will do all this in a mobile-friendly, device-agnostic (BYOD), micro-learning, digital and decentralized environment in which the learners themselves play an increasingly important role as both consumer and contributor.

Biographical Details:

Melissa Noonan – St. Charles Consulting Group Managing Director

Melissa is a strategic, results-oriented thought leader with 25 years of progressive experience driving talent development and organizational change strategies to accelerate the achievement of business objectives. She has a proven record of gaining executive level buy-in and delivering business impact. Her key areas of emphasis include: talent strategy development and planning, competency development, leadership and high-potential program development, succession planning, performance management, middle management and executive coaching, change management and employee engagement.

Gina Ann Richter, Ph.D – St. Charles Consulting Group Director

Gina brings a Ph.D in instructional design for online learning and over 20 years' of experience to help clients solve strategic business needs through learning and development solutions. In her roles as learning strategist, she has led the development of curation strategies, and guided platform implementations in alignment with company learning ecosystems, with a focus on social learning to ensure greater collaboration within organizations. Gina brings deep expertise in the design, development, and delivery of efficient and effective learning experiences that enable businesses to drive results.

Larry Durham – St. Charles Consulting Group Partner

Larry is a visionary in the fields of enterprise learning and talent development. Over the last 25 years, he has worked with many Fortune 500 companies to co-create innovative talent development solutions that yield measurable business outcomes. In implementation, Larry is highly regarded for his ability to manage complex strategic transformation initiatives. His experience spans many industries, including technology, pharmaceuticals, financial services, telecommunications, media, hotel and leisure, utilities and energy, and retail and consumer.

Eric Pierce – St. Charles Consulting Group Managing Director

Throughout his 28-year career, Eric has built an extensive portfolio of practical and wide-ranging business consulting experiences yielding accelerated and profitable business growth as well as outstanding leadership, executive, and managerial effectiveness, both at the individual and team levels. During his career, Eric has held key executive positions with organizations in the technology, professional services, and non-profit sectors. Before joining St. Charles Consulting, Eric was the Chief Operating Officer and Vice-President of Strategy for CourseAvenue, a start-up offering professional services and a suite of Cloud-based eLearning software products.

About St. Charles Consulting Group

St. Charles Consulting Group is known for its expertise in providing innovative and highly effective learning solutions. Our founding partners and many of our team members were once Arthur Andersen learning professionals at Andersen's Worldwide Center for Training and Development. We operate out of two locations – St. Charles, Illinois and Dallas, Texas – powered by over 400 consultants in the fields of: learning, organization development, knowledge services, and workforce planning.

Since its inception in 2002, St. Charles Consulting Group has spent the last 15 years building a premier, management consulting organization delivering hundreds of talent development solutions to over 120 client organizations. Our innovative perspective on what needs to be done to design, build and support people solutions for our clients is derived from years of experience. Our goals are simple. We strive to:

- Enhance your organization's ability to learn and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances
- Help you anticipate what is needed to attain strategic objectives
- Ensure your people thrive in both current and future business environments by *Preparing Your People for Your Tomorrow*

To learn more about St. Charles Consulting Group and our services, access this link: www.stccg.com

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